



The River at Cow Down the SSSI on the North Bank and the Adjacent Field to the North.

Dear [REDACTED]

Thank you on behalf of Itchen Valley Parish Council for agreeing to hold the recent Fact Finding meeting in connection with the works at Cow Down and along the stretch of river running from there to the bridge at Itchen Abbas. Our role, as locally-elected representatives, is to engage with residents and groups on a wide range of different issues and to represent the Parish and the people who live in it, to respond to their queries and investigate their concerns.

Given the strength of feeling aroused in the community by your proposed plans for the protection of the river at Cow Down where access has been allowed in the past and the SSSI on the North Bank, it would be remiss of us not to make some representation on the topic. As we seek always to act fairly and impartially, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias, we want to assure you that following the Fact Finding Meeting we are very well apprised of the challenges inherent in this situation and are seeking primarily to offer assistance wherever we can.

We also recognise that you must be feeling somewhat frustrated and that you are also encumbered with certain legal responsibilities which must be respected. We also recognise as Landowners and the Riparian Owner of the Itchen at Cow Down, that you are perfectly within your rights to act as you see fit to protect the Itchen chalk streams and its wider eco-system.

The principal issues as we understand them to be are:

- Poor water quality in this stretch of the river from Alresford downstream
- Damage to riverbed (SSSI), evidenced by silting and lack of macrophytes
- Loss of native species (otters, bullheads, ranunculi etc)
- Damage to the riverbank at Cow Down – aggravated by an unprecedented number of visitors during the hot weather after the first lockdown
- Tree safety; prevalence of ash dieback which means instability of the trees compromises the safety of the public
- Difficulties of your tenant managing land with cattle and footpath users; made more challenging by the increase use of the area by visitors unfamiliar with the countryside code.

- Car parking and wider littering in the Chilland Lane area
- Private ownership and associated liabilities

The Parish Council are unanimous in support of the river improvement project and protecting the SSSI. We also recognise that it is likely that a great many people passing through the field at Cow Down do not know of or understand the fragility of these eco-systems and the specific damage which may be caused by even a moderate degree of human interference. We fully appreciate that this area has been put under even greater pressure by the huge increase of human traffic during this unprecedented year.

However, we have some concerns about the plan you are proposing to tackle these issues and in particular the proposed fencing-in of the footpath 31 across Cow Down. The definitive map describes this path as one across pasture and whilst we recognise that the projected fenced area is wider than is required, the sense of being constrained and forced to pass at close quarters is likely to make many people uneasy. Nor does the plan recognise that people have had access to this area for many generations. There is also the question of upkeep of the surface of the fenced area, how the path will be maintained and by whom remains unclear. Our experience is that fencing of open pastureland is extremely unpopular with our residents.

While we also understand that there is a safety issue with some of the trees by the river bank, there are other options besides the present plans for fencing in of the path and that it may be worth exploring to both mitigate the risk and to protect the SSSI. Perhaps the trees could and should be fenced in as part of the SSSI. The *Watercress and Winterbourne Project* has demonstrated that promoting responsible access can actually help build understanding and aid conservation. With your agreement we are very keen to open the dialogue on this topic to avoid loss of amenity to the community and believe that we can help to find a solution which benefits all the stakeholders

We can also help in other more tangible ways.

With your agreement we would run a community education programme to increase awareness of the importance of the river life and the SSSI and, particularly, how human activities in the associated environment can compromise the health of the river and SSSI.

This can be achieved in a variety of different ways; through targeted communications, information boards and guidance notices; through talks, gaining support from local schools, and promoting guided walks. There is a great precedent set through the *Watercress and Winterborne Project*, an initiative wherein 16 different organisations have collaborated to raise awareness of the cultural and

ecological significance of the Hampshire chalk streams which has succeeded in getting widespread community buy-in and active public involvement in its conservation goals. We believe that a well-focused education programme and perhaps some controlled educational access to the river will go some distance to increasing community buy-in in this instance as well.

On a practical level we can also help manage the people using the area. Some concerns over parking in Chilland Lane and other nearby areas have been raised. We can direct drivers towards the car park at Couch Green to avoid unnecessary congestion and obstruction. To prevent littering and dog waste being left on the down, we can take action to make some combined bins easily accessible. With your agreement we will put up signage to remind walkers of their responsibilities. There is also potentially support from the SDNP Rangers scheme which can help enforce and promote responsible dog ownership and thus alleviate some of the difficulties of having cattle and walkers on the same land.

In summary we support the long-term goals to improve the Itchen and SSSI, but we also recognise the communities concerns and would like to work in partnership with you to alleviate the ongoing management of the area whilst also retaining as far as is possible in the long term its amenity for the community.

We thank you in advance for your continued consideration of this matter and look forward to providing such support as is deemed to be beneficial and appropriate.

For and on Behalf of Itchen Valley Parish Council

Yours sincerely

Patrick Appleby

Chairman, Itchen Valley Parish Council